In February, while I finished work on a book about China, a publishing company in Shanghai asked for an early copy, in order to begin a translation. The book follows people I’ve come to know, some prominent, others not, as they try to change their lives in a country throbbing with possibility — individuals like Gong Haiyan, a farmer’s daughter and businesswoman who envisions herself in a “race against the clock, to seize the initiative before it’s lost.”

After reading the manuscript, an editor in Shanghai replied with enthusiasm, but also sent me a list of politically active people in the narrative who, he wrote, “would be difficult” to include in the Chinese edition: a lawyer (Chen Guangcheng), an artist (Ai Weiwei), three writers (Liu Xiaobo, Murong Xuecun, Han Han) and “a few others.” He made a proposal: “Please kindly let me know if it is possible for us to cooperate on a special version of your book for its Chinese publication.” I had a choice to make.

The defining fact of China in our time is its contradictions: The world’s largest buyer of BMW, Jaguar and Land Rover vehicles is ruled by a Communist Party that has tried to banish the word “luxury” from advertisements. It is home to two of the world’s most highly valued Internet companies (Tencent and Baidu), as well as history’s most sophisticated effort to censor human expression. China is both the world’s newest superpower and its largest authoritarian state.

For most of Chinese history, readers had limited access to books from abroad. In the 1960s and ’70s, when foreign literature was officially restricted to party elites, students circulated handwritten, string-bound copies of J.D. Salinger, Arthur Conan Doyle and many others. But in the past three decades, rules have relaxed somewhat and sales of foreign writers have ballooned, thanks to Chinese consumers who are ravenous for new information about themselves and the world. In 2012, the most recent year for which statistics are available, China’s 580 state-owned publishers acquired the rights to more than 16,000 foreign titles, up nearly tenfold since 1995; current hot sellers range from Gabriel García Márquez’s “One Hundred Years of Solitude” to Henry A. Kissinger’s “On China.”

Ever since the reign of the first emperor, who oversaw the burning of Confucian texts in 213 B.C., Chinese leaders have valued the science of censorship. To release a book in China today, foreign authors must accept the judgment of a publisher’s in-house censors, who identify names, terms and historical events that the party considers unflattering or a threat to political stability.

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When the Chinese edition of Khaled Hosseini’s novel “The Kite Runner” was published in 2006, critical references to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan were removed. (For Chinese authors, the stakes are incomparably larger; they either heed restrictions or lose the ability to publish in their home country. Prosecutors can cite published writing as evidence of “incitement to subvert state power.”) If publishers overlook a taboo, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television can pull books from the shelves and punish those responsible. Similar scrutiny applies to television shows, films and radio programs, and the government keeps an especially close eye on broadcasting, because it reaches the most people. When President Obama, in his first inaugural address, mentioned earlier generations who “faced down fascism and Communism,” China’s state broadcaster cut away. The word “Communism” did not appear on transcripts published in the Chinese press.

Living and writing in Beijing from 2005 to 2013, I found that the precise boundaries of the censored world were difficult to map. Though some rules leak to the public — last month, the State Council Information Office advised all websites to “find and remove the video titled ‘Actual Footage of Chengdu Police Surrounding and Beating Homeowners Who Were Defending Their Rights”’ — most of the censored world is populated by unmentionable names and untellable stories, defined by rules that are themselves secret. The Central Propaganda Department, the highest-ranking agency responsible for “thought work,” does not report on its activities; it is so averse to attention that its headquarters, on the Avenue of Eternal Peace, have no address or sign. To quantify one realm of Chinese censorship, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, in 2012, studied messages on Sina Weibo, the social media site. They found that more than 16 percent of all posts were deleted because of the content.

One known fact about China’s censored world is that it is growing. Movie theaters are proliferating by the day, and Hollywood makes the cuts required to reach them. The makers of “Skyfall,” the latest James Bond film, removed a scene involving the killing of a Chinese security guard, and a plot line in which Javier Bardem says he became a villain during his time in Chinese custody. The New York Times has been unable to receive new residency visas for journalists for more than a year, because it reported on the family wealth of Chinese leaders. Bloomberg News is facing similar retaliation for its investigations of party officials. In March, the Bloomberg L.P. chairman, Peter T. Grauer, said the company “should have rethought” the decision to range beyond business news, because it jeopardized the company’s potential market in China.

But as I considered publishing a book in China, local publishers gradually filled in a road map of the censored world. On behalf of a company in Beijing, an agent wrote, “To allow the publication in China, the author will agree to revise nearly 1/4 of the contents.” The publisher had itemized trouble spots chapter by chapter, beginning with a line in the prologue: “China has never been more pluralistic, urban, and prosperous, yet it is the only country in the world with a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in prison.” (The first half of the sentence could stay.)

Some taboos were foreseeable; the publisher worried about a mention of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, because that project resulted in a famine that killed between 30 and 45 million people. Other problems were subtler; since the party credits its economic success to Deng Xiaoping, I was advised not to lavish too much praise on the contributions of his peers. Judging by the notes, the censor seemed to grow exasperated: “Chapter 14: The whole chapter is about Chen Guangcheng.” (I write about Mr. Chen, a blind lawyer now in exile in the United States, as an example of Chinese determination to defy the circumstances of birth.)

In some cases, the censors’ requirements startled me: The former politician Bo Xilai, a one-time rising star now serving a life sentence for corruption, was convicted in a trial covered by state television, so why is discussion of him sensitive? The problem, it seemed, is how it can be mentioned, and how much. When an official version of history has been written, an unofficial version becomes unwelcome.

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A foreign author who wants to publish in China can find many reasons to tolerate the demands for censorship. A book, even compromised, might inspire a new generation of readers to demand information from beyond their borders; it might help pay for the writing of the next book (or, let’s face it, a new roof). As a writer, it is tempting to rationalize the discomfort by emphasizing the percentage of the book that survives the cuts, rather than the percentage that is censored.

But those explanations fail to surmount an inexorable problem. The most difficult part of writing about contemporary China is capturing its proportions: How much of the story is truly inspiring, and how much of it is truly grim? How much of its values are reflected in technology start-ups and stories of self-creation, and how much of its values are reflected in the Great Firewall and abuses of power? It is tempting to accept censorship as a matter of the margins — a pruning that leaves the core of the story intact — but altering the proportions of a portrait of China gives a false reflection of how China appears to the world at a moment when it is making fundamental choices about what kind of country it will become.

In the end, I decided not to publish my book in mainland China. (It will be available to Chinese readers from a publisher in Taiwan.) To produce a “special version” that plays down dissent, trims the Great Leap Forward, and recites the official history of Bo Xilai’s corruption would not help Chinese readers. On the contrary, it would endorse a false image of the past and present. As a writer, my side of the bargain is to give the truest story I can.

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